



**The Comptroller General
of the United States**

Washington, D.C. 20548

Decision

Matter of: Faustino W. Lopez - Reimbursement for labor to pack and load household goods

File: B-232600

Date: August 3, 1989

DIGEST

An employee, who was authorized to move under the actual expense method, claims reimbursement for \$353 he paid a friend for assisting him in packing and moving his household goods over a 4-day period. The employing agency questions whether this amount is reasonable. It is the agency's responsibility initially to determine whether the amount is reasonable, although under the circumstances of this case, we would not object to employee being reimbursed the entire \$353 if the agency found it to be an appropriate amount.

DECISION

A transferred employee claims reimbursement for \$353 he paid a friend to assist him in packing and moving household goods in connection with moving himself. The agency has asked us to determine whether this amount is reasonable.^{1/} While the matter of reasonableness is initially for the agency to determine, under the circumstances of this case, we would not object to the employee being reimbursed the \$353 that he paid his friend.

BACKGROUND

In February 1988, Mr. Faustino W. Lopez, an employee of the Department of the Interior, was transferred from Flatiron, Colorado, to Glendo, Wyoming. Prior to departing for his new duty station, Mr. Lopez was authorized to ship his household goods under a government bill of lading (GBL). He chose to move himself and be reimbursed for the expenses that he incurred. When he completed his move, he submitted a request for reimbursement of expenses that, among other

^{1/} Ms. Sandra L. Inglefield, an Authorized Certifying Officer of the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, submitted the case for an advance decision.

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items, included \$353 for the cost of a laborer to help him in packing and moving his 11,500 pounds of household goods. In support of this expense he submitted a receipt from a Mr. Dale Doyle indicating that Mr. Doyle had received \$353 from him.

The agency requested additional information about the nature of this expense. Mr. Lopez then explained that Mr. Doyle, a family friend, had worked approximately 43-1/2 hours from February 23-26, 1988, in packing and moving the household goods, for which Mr. Lopez paid Mr. Doyle the \$353.

The certifying officer indicates that the agency contacted someone at the General Services Administration (GSA) to inquire as to the reasonableness of the \$353 charge. The GSA contact advised the agency that the minimum wage per hour would be a more appropriate amount to pay than the approximately \$8 per hour Mr. Lopez states he paid. The agency questions whether this amount is reasonable in regard to the nature of the work performed and the number of hours worked. The agency, therefore, asks us for a determination of the appropriate method to be used to arrive at a reasonable amount to reimburse Mr. Lopez.

OPINION

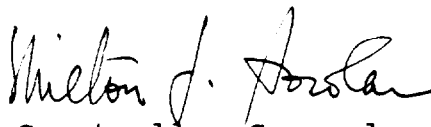
When an employee, such as Mr. Lopez, is authorized to ship his household goods under a GBL and chooses to move the goods himself, he is entitled to be reimbursed the actual expenses he incurs for such items as truck rental, gasoline, and tolls, not to exceed what it would have cost the government to move the goods by commercial carrier under a GBL. See 41 C.F.R. § 101-40.203-2(d); Kenneth W. Sloop, B-229375, May 12, 1988, and cases cited therein. An employee's reimbursement may include the actual cost incurred for labor to help the employee pack and load household goods when an appropriate receipt is furnished to substantiate that payment was actually made pursuant to an arm's-length contract. See Michael L. Smiley, B-226189, Dec. 9, 1988. Of course, as with any amount reimbursed to an employee for travel and transportation costs, the amount must be reasonable regardless of whether the payment is within the maximum reimbursement available to the employee.

In regard to the appropriate level of reimbursement to an employee for travel or transportation expenses, we have held that it is the responsibility of the agency to make the initial determination, and we will not disturb that determination unless it is clearly erroneous or arbitrary and capricious. See Ellward H. Gegenheimer, B-213339, Jan. 25, 1984. In cases where the agency has not made a

determination as to what would be a reasonable amount to reimburse an employee, we have returned the case to the agency for such a determination. See Marshal R. Wilke, B-202778, June 28, 1982. Here, however, the agency asks us for advice as to how to make the determination.

In making such a determination, the agency may seek advice from local moving companies as to their views of what a reasonable charge for this labor would be in the local area. Of course it may also use the advice it received from GSA to assist in making the determination. In this regard we informally contacted a branch chief in the GSA traffic management organization in Washington, D.C., who told us that in his opinion the total cost for the work done was reasonable and that the number of hours claimed to have been worked by Mr. Doyle was not excessive.

Thus, while it is primarily for the agency to determine what is the appropriate amount to reimburse Mr. Lopez, under the circumstances of this case, we would not object to his being reimbursed the \$353 should the agency determine that amount to be appropriate.

for 
Comptroller General
of the United States